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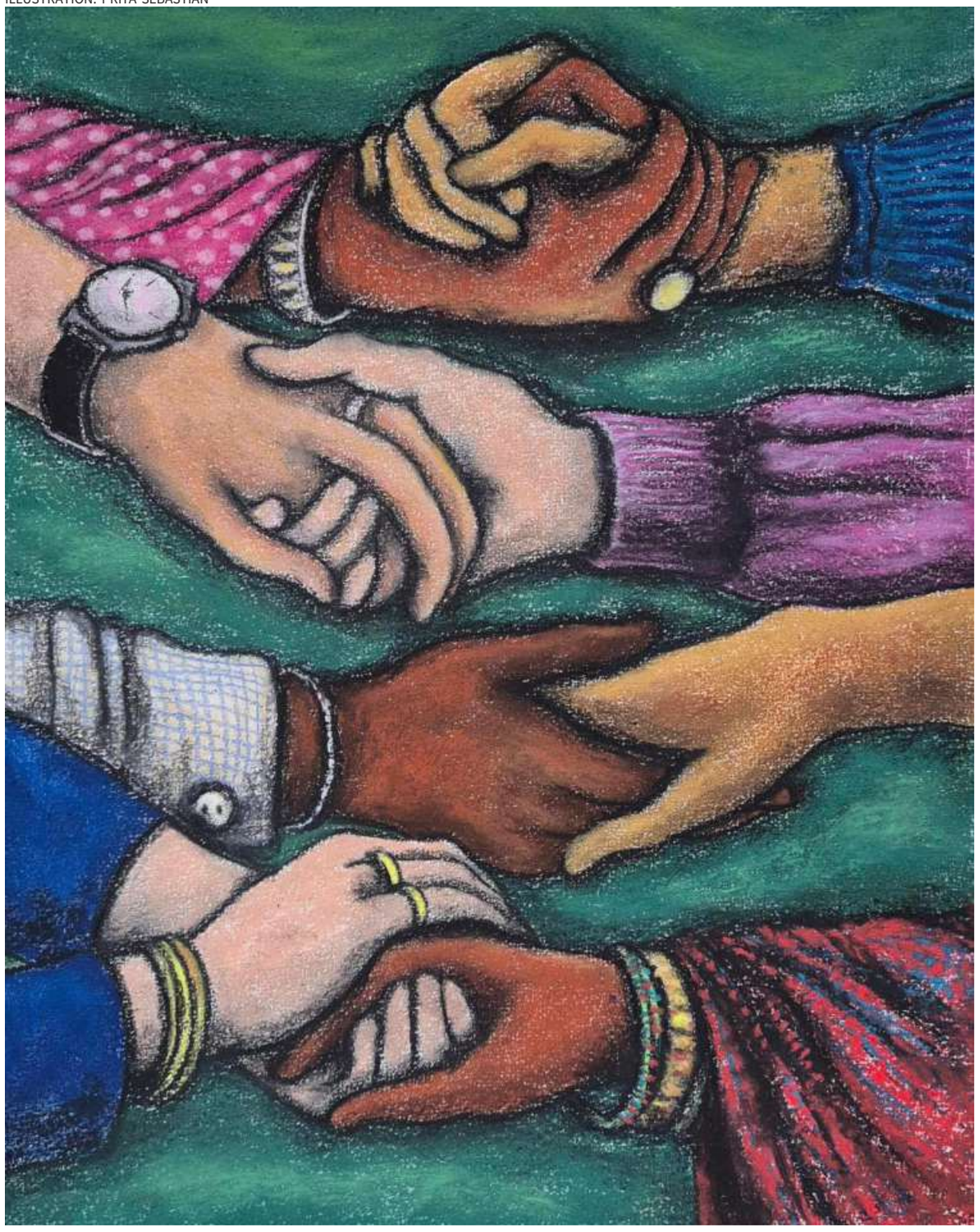

SISTERHOOD IN THE CITY

Women are showing up for each other — on WhatsApp groups, at midnight walks, and even in exercise circles. They are swapping life lessons, coming to each other's aid, and affirming that 'you are not alone'

I have a cousin who got beaten up by her husband and they need legal support. Does anyone have any contacts?" reads a message on the 'Women for Women' WhatsApp group on a random Sunday. Even though the message is posted around midnight, help pours in within minutes – many share contacts, references, possible solutions, and more – as the group comes together to aid a woman none there has ever met. The WhatsApp community, started as an initiative in 2024 by Sumedha Dey, a women's studies scholar in Kolkata, is pan-India today. It has become a free space for discussions, support, and more.

Women's collectives and groups are a rising phenomenon in urban India, as women try to navigate a new world where they are independent yet not devoid of the need for safe spaces and genuine human connections. Women are coming together to create 'sisterhoods', to "do life together" as a community. Be it midnight walks, sharing job opportunities, offering solidarity and friendship in a new city, an exercise group, or even a book club, they are exploring different kinds of kinship and building safe spaces for each other.

Nowhere is this more evident today, and making headlines, than in Kerala. In 2017, a group of film actors, writers and technicians formed the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), following the sexual assault case involving a prominent actress in the Malayalam film industry. On December 8, when Malayalam actor Dileep walked out scot-free after being acquitted in one of Kerala's most closely watched sexual assault and abduction cases (six other men were found guilty), men gathered outside the Ernakulam District and Sessions Court to show solidarity. They were seen cheering and clicking his photos. But the women, inside and outside the WCC, refused to break – even after their long fight against Dileep, who was accused of criminal conspiracy to kidnap and assault the actress.

The once popular hashtag #avalkoppam (with her) from 2017 started trending once again as thousands came out in solidarity with the survivor. "When the rape and abduction first happened in 2017, we formed a WhatsApp group and there was an angry and emotional outpouring of our own stories of abuse," recalls Bina Paul, one of the founding members of the the WCC. "Though many of us have worked together in the same industry for years, we realised we had not collectivised and spoken about our ordeals before. This became the trigger point." In the years that followed, they made their voice heard. From meeting with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan to voice their safety concerns, advocating for their rights within the industry, to standing with the survivor as she fought the case for over eight years, they came through.

Paul, a senior editor in the Malayalam film industry, adds that their coming together gave the survivor strength, and in turn gave WCC the power to fight against the systematic abuse, male-domination, and patriarchal systems of the industry. "When we first started, people used to ask, 'What will a bunch of privileged women do?'," says Jolly Chirayath, a Malayalam actor and WCC member. "But over time, WCC brought about the Hema Committee report [a state-appointed inquiry into systemic sexual harassment and power abuse in the Malayalam film industry], and pushed women from other industries and other parts of the country to speak up against the workplace harassment they faced." She adds they are with "the survivor in however she wants to take the fight forward", but Chirayath is clear that they want answers on who the masterminds of the case are. "If Dileep is acquitted, then who did it? We deserve answers."

Aishwarya Subramanyam

In a way, the survivor and her reaction in the Dileep case was a crucial stepping stone, which led to many women in the Hindi film industry too speaking out about the abuse they faced in Bollywood. Actor Tanushree Dutta stepped up first, and it snowballed from there. This also triggered the #MeToo movement across India in 2018, when common women verbalised their stories of abuse and harassment at the workplace. Corporate honchos, mediapersons and academics were named in the list of abusers, leading to a wider reckoning across professions, as women began questioning not just individual perpetrators but the systems that enabled silence and impunity. Women's collectives started taking shape, and gaining strength.

Bina Paul, member of WCC

Creating city-wide lifelines

Generations of Indian women have heard the phrase "women are women's biggest enemies". The narrative has been used to divide them, and force them to suffer in silence rather than find kinship in a community. However, when societal systems and administration fail, women have always been each other's strongest defenders and cheerleaders. Across India's cities now, women's networks are taking shape to become a lifeline, leading through solidarity.

Last year, Aishwarya Subramanyam, popularly known as @otherwarya on social media, encouraged her followers to start a sisterhood cohort through WhatsApp in their respective cities. "There is a lot of talk about the male loneliness epidemic. But women are equally lonely, and struggle to find like-minded people," shares Subramanyam. "We were having a discussion [on Instagram] about this and that is where the idea came about, so women could meet and find a safe space and build a community. This is about friendship and connection, this is not subscriber-based. We want to keep it informal, just how organic friend groups should be." These tight-knit groups function on a hybrid model: they have digital shared spaces and in-person meet-ups.

Free movement is liberation, and traditionally, women have not had this. So, to own a bike or a car and take control of a powerful engine makes you feel strong. When we ride our own bikes, we can go out at any time without seeking permission from people or worrying about our safety in someone else's vehicle

URVASHI PATOLE
Founding member of The Bikerni, which is now in 11 cities and has over 2,500 members

In Bengaluru, Sisters in Sweat (SIS) was launched in 2017 as a for-profit organisation to bridge the gap of women dropping out of sports after school or college. The community, which promotes fitness and wellness through sports, is now also a space for bonding and camaraderie. "This is my way to stay close to my husband [an ardent football lover]," says a woman in her 30s, who joined SIS after she lost him a few years back. It helped her feel closer to her late spouse and, in the process, she discovered a community of women who played with her every Sunday and stood by her through her grief.

Swetha Subbiah, a fitness trainer and co-founder of SIS, remembers the group's first meeting in 2017 – when 17 women showed up to play a friendly football match. "Something magical happened after that first Sunday. Every week, more women started to show up, brought their friends too. This became their safe space, their 'me time' away from other roles at home and work," says Subbaih. "This is now beyond sports and physical activity. This is a dose of community building that has helped many with their mental health issues, to find a group they can fall back on." The SIS community is thriving across five cities now, and has over 15,000 members.

Women have always stood together

Many women-led groups, both formal and informal, are in operation across India, such as the Network of Women in Media (women in journalism), The Bikerni (women two-wheeler riders), Sheroes (networking group), Break Free Stories (divorced women group), and Majlis (women lawyers offering legal aid). While each may have a different cause and origin story, they are all bound by a common thread: to create safe spaces for women.

The formations of these structured groups may be a recent phenomenon, coming up in the last decade or so, helped by the availability of the Internet, but the truth is women have always found ways to stand together. Even when the initiatives were not so structured.

When the woman doctor in Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital was raped and murdered at her workplace on August 9 last year, emotions ran high. Anger spread across the city, then the State, and even took root in multiple States across India. On the nights of August 14 and 15, lakhs of women took to the streets of West Bengal to 'Reclaim the Night' as their own. With candles in hand and songs of protest on their lips, they claimed space for their deceased sister, daughter, and friend.

Years before Reclaim the Night, women had already shown what it means to hold space. During the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, they came together in December 2019 to protest the controversial bill. It started with 15 women from the Muslim-dominated area in Shaheen Bagh; however, in the next few weeks, thousands started joining as the cause resonated across societies.

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Reclaiming the streets

One of the best known women's initiatives is 'Women Walk at Midnight'. Started by Mallika Taneja in Delhi in 2016, it encourages women across India to walk around their cities and live and breathe freely. "We never have to explain what the movement is to other women or queer and trans people," says Taneja. "But men ask us, 'What will you get out of this walk?' Because they have always walked freely, they do not know how restricted a woman's movement is in her own city, own country." There are 13 groups across India that keep in touch over WhatsApp. And the frequency and location are decided based on the individuals and how each city works. "There have been many before us you have resisted, and there will be many after us. It is like a *silsila* [series]. That we can do these walks is also a culmination of the fight of the women who came before us," she says, adding that hopefully soon women walking at night will become a common sight, so mundane that society will stop questioning it.

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

READING INTO CHRISTMAS

Of books that inspire a kinder, greener and more joyful festive season with friends and family

Sudha G. Tilak

Every December, as homes twinkle and kitchens warm with spice, families return to rituals stitched together by memory and the simplest of gestures like reading, baking, crafting, giving. Christmas is not merely an event; it is a season that invites us to slow down, gather our people, and make something beautiful out of what we already have. For some, that beauty is found in the quiet familiarity of home; for others, it emerges in new landscapes.

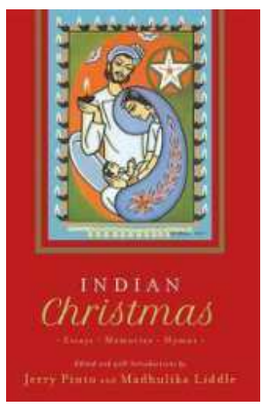
This year, I am in London, chasing a long-held dream of experiencing a White Christmas. I wander through festive markets wrapped in scarves and nostalgia, inhaling the comforting spices that rise from steaming mugs of mulled wine. Church bells chime with an old-world certainty, choirs lift their evensong into a soft, amber-lit dusk, and towering trees shimmer in gold and glass. The holiday rush is everywhere, there are queues of shoppers at every corner, but I go down a different street.

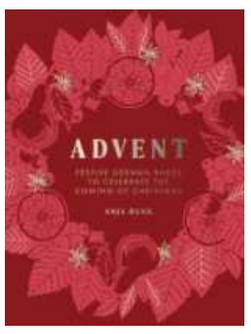
I slip into the bookstores. They are warm, wood-panelled sanctuaries humming with the rustle of pages, where window displays glow with Christmas-themed reads. There are mysteries and murders like *A Very Merry Murder* by Kate Wells and *Mince Pies and Murder* by J. R. Leigh; quirky humour like *A Very British Christmas: A Survival Guide* by Rob Temple; and shelves of children's books such as Sophie Beer's bright and tender *The Twelve Days of Kindness*. But as always, I drift towards the self-help and cookbook aisles. Here, among the spines, I find a handful of books that invite intention, sustainability and generosity into our celebrations.

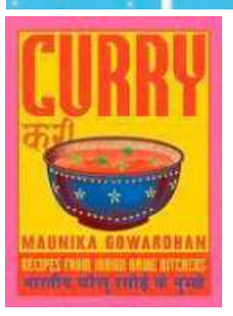
An Indian December

Some of my favourites include Jen Chillingsworth's *Green Christmas* and Anja Dunk's *Advent* that stand out for their simplicity and warmth. Chillingsworth gently nudges readers towards festive creativity steeped in reuse and nature: dried citrus garlands, upcycled wrapping paper, homemade scrubs and infused oils that make thoughtful, low-waste gifts. Dunk's *Advent*, written with the lyricism of someone who is part historian, part baker, celebrates the rituals of shared kitchens and the slow anticipation that gives December its special glow. Her gingerbread hearts, cinnamon stars and salt-dough ornaments mirror the spirit in Indian homes where December means rose cookies, *kulkuls*, bebinca and fruit cakes assembled with the labour of many hands.

Sarah Rossi's celebratory *What's for Christmas Dinner?* offers treats and, as a nod to wellness, crunchy fruit salads for kids, Raj-era red onion chutney, and practical shopping tips and meal plans. My favourite is Jassy Davis' *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Cocktails*, a slim cheerful volume of festive favourites such as mulled wine, eggnog and Mrs. Claus's Secret. For the aunty who sighs, "My tippling days are over, child," there are recipes for cranberry and pomegranate nojito, spiced hot chocolate, or the delish pistachio and white chocolate milkshake.







These books champion a handmade Christmas, shaped by what we already possess, not what we rush out to buy. Their ideas adapt effortlessly to an Indian setting: pomelo or lemon slices dried on a windowsill, ornaments with Indian motifs, gift wraps fashioned from old *dupattas* or cloth scraps, and the ever-reliable brown paper (now a favourite material for conscious crafters), and cooking in the company of friends and family.

To understand how Christmas lives and breathes in India, Jerry Pinto and Madhulika Liddle's *Indian Christmas* continues to be a delightful, and essential read for me. Through essays and memories gathered from across the country, the book captures the sensory landscape of an Indian December: the glow of parish choirs practising under streetlights, the aroma of pork sorpotel drifting across neighbourhoods, the affectionate traffic of homemade sweets moving between homes. The edition published in India has a "cousin" printed in the U.S. – *A Very Indian Christmas: The Greatest Holiday Stories of All Time* – and the anthology has additional pieces by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Khushwant Singh, and Aravind Adiga complementing the original Indian edition. These stories prove what we've always known: that India absorbs festivals with its own improvisational genius.

Made by hand and by heart

Creativity, of course, is not limited to kitchens and storytelling. Books like *The Eco-Christmas Craft Book* by Marrianne Miall offer gentle craft ideas using natural materials such as pressed leaves, botanical drawings, simple ornaments, that pair beautifully with Indian flora. Tara Books' acclaimed *The Night Life of Trees*, illustrated by Gond artists, becomes a wellspring of inspiration for ornaments and décor rooted in folk art – think cardboard baubles with tribal motifs or hand-painted stars using earthy dyes. Maunika Gowardhan, author of cookbook *Curry*, nudges you to try out her Christmas goose dum biryani recipe as a table showstopper.

What connects all these books, whether from the snow-glazed windows of Europe or the sun-warmed balconies of India, is their gentle insistence on intention. They remind us that we can shape a festive season that resists excess, celebrates imagination, and honours the communities we inhabit. In India, we have a long tradition of cooking from scratch, and for the community, and crafting from what remains – like stitching together decorations from fabric scraps, making stars from bamboo or coconut leaves, reusing ribbons year after year. Balcony plants stand in proudly for fir trees, wrapped in fairy lights and paper ornaments crafted by children.

Books also remind us that charity begins right where we are in the kitchen. Sharing cake with security guards, preparing sweet boxes for delivery workers, organising neighbourhood cookie-swaps or pre-loved book exchanges, all become meaningful gestures that reflect the heart of the festival.

In a world overflowing with things, these books nudge us towards what the season really asks for: attention, kindness, imagination. Whether you find yourself in a bustling London market or a Chennai kitchen fragrant with ghee and spices, Christmas remains a season made by hand and by heart.

The writer is the author of Temple Tales *and translator of* Hungry Humans.

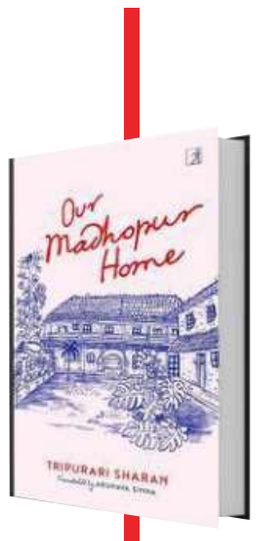
ONE FOR THE ROAD

Happy holidays

A selection of crisp yet compulsive reads to carry into the new year

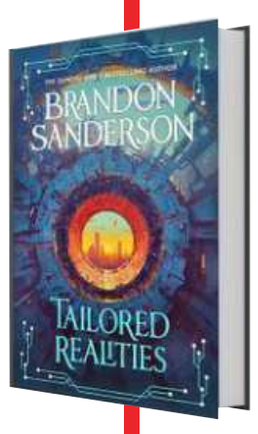
Swati Daftuar

This is the last reading list of the year, arriving in that slackened stretch when schedules loosen and reading mirrors an easy, unhurried pace. These are books for that in-between time: to keep close over the holidays, to dip into between plans, to carry quietly into the new year.



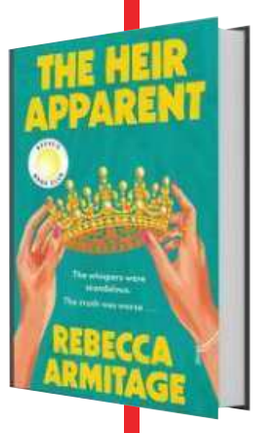
Our Madhopur Home | Tripurari Sharan, trs Arunava Sinha
Set in an ancestral house in Bihar, this novel's most charming sleight of hand is the narrator: Laura, the family dog. She observes generations with loyalty, curiosity, and a disarming lack of human vanity. The result is a quietly moving meditation on belonging that avoids sentimentality. The author's grasp of social life, shaped by his years in public service, keeps the novel's world steady and believable, while Sinha's measured translation (his first from Hindi) lets the story breathe.

(Simon & Schuster; ₹499)



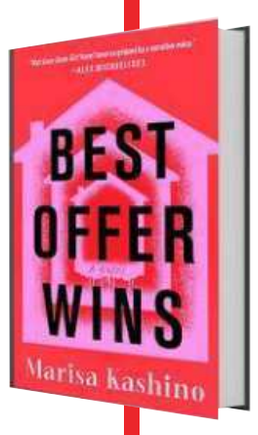
Tailored Realities | Brandon Sanderson
The author known for his imaginative universes swaps epic sprawl for compact precision here. Each story in this sci-fi and fantasy anthology nudges reality just off-centre – a rule bent, a system tweaked – and waits to see what breaks. The pleasure is in the clean ideas, neatly followed through, with no excess ornamentation. With a stunning black-and-white illustration for each story, this is a must read for fans and newbies alike.

(Gollancz; ₹999)



The Heir Apparent | Rebecca Armitage
A brisk, contemporary take on reluctant royalty. Lexi Villiers is content with her low-key life on a Tasmanian farm until a family tragedy pulls her into the public eye, and into the role of heir apparent. Palace rituals, press scrutiny, and long-buried family secrets follow. Armitage brings a sly wit to the clash between private self and public duty, and much of the fun lies in watching someone push back against the shape the world insists on giving her.

(HQ; ₹1,600 [ebook])



Best Offer Wins | Marisa Kashino
After bidding on and losing several houses for months, Margo Miyake discovers a perfect... and unlisted house. And Margo is done playing by the rules – a decision that pushes her over the edge. What follows is a sharp, spiralling story about desire, status, and the murky ethics of modern ambition. Drawing on her background in real estate journalism, the author paints a vivid, unsettling portrait of the lengths people will go to. A brisk, compulsive read.

(Celadon Books; ₹1,829)

The Cat Share | Angela Jariwala
What begins with one greedy (and smart) little cat ends in something far more uplifting in this delightful romcom about two unsuspecting neighbours and their shared pet. Jariwala writes modern relationships with a light, attentive touch, and there's a subtle grace she brings to contemporary relationships. The novel feels almost like a conversation you didn't know you needed – warm, thoughtful, and hard to walk away from.

(Simon & Schuster; ₹599)

(A monthly column on popular fiction.)

The writer is an independent journalist, editor, and literary curator.

Between silences

Ghosh's writing avoids excess and highlights the small moments that count

Abdullah Khan

In his novel *Lonely People Meet*, Sayantan Ghosh offers a debut that walks the fine line between an urban love story and a fable of memory and identity, with elements of speculative fiction. What begins as a simple romance in the gardens and streets of Delhi gradually turns into a reflection on what it means to feel real in a world shaped by illusion, or, in the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, by *maya*.

At its heart is Karno, editor by day and writer by night, whose meeting with Devaki changes the rhythm of his life. Their romance grows through walks in Lodhi Garden, coffee at the old Madras Coffee House, and browsing the secluded corners of bookshops. Ghosh captures the first glimmer of love with finesse. His writing avoids excess and highlights small moments and unspoken feelings.

The novel's strength lies in the way it moves from the personal to the philosophical. The author's world feels familiar but slightly altered, a place where truth and imagination blur and where relationships are tested by what we choose to believe. He handles these ideas with subtlety, never allowing them to become abstract or theoretical.

Ghosh's prose is measured; he understands silence and gives it space. There are pauses that speak louder than dialogue. The novel does not explain everything; it trusts the reader to read between the lines.

Lonely People Meet
Sayantan Ghosh
Bloomsbury India
₹399

The book, though engaging, has a few uneven moments. Some of the ideas about memory and identity feel more hinted at than developed, and a few secondary characters pass through the story too briefly to leave a mark. At times, the precision of language seems to hold back emotion.

I wish the author had invested more in peeling back the layers of his main characters and delving deeper into their inner conflicts. Perhaps the editor within the author kept him from venturing further into those emotional spaces. The novel, as a result, feels beautifully crafted but somewhat restrained.

Delhi, however, is beautifully brought alive. The city feels like a companion, its cafés, lanes and gardens shaping the mood of the story. Ghosh's Delhi is at once familiar and distant, full of life yet touched by solitude. His eye for detail and sense of atmosphere give the novel an authenticity.

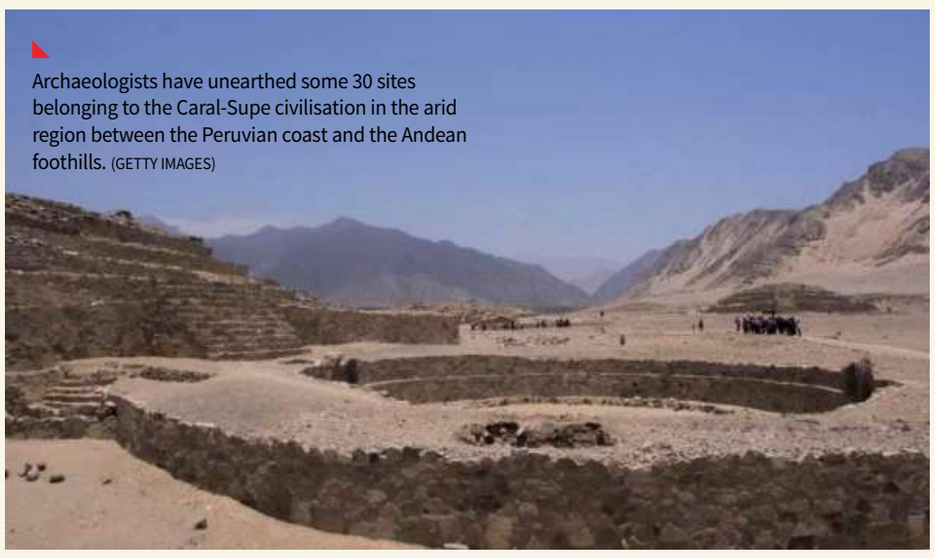
The story carries traces of Ghosh's reading life, too. There are references to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and Hisham Matar's *The Return*, which enable readers to understand the intellectual calibre and literary tastes that define the characters. Ghosh's acknowledgement of Teju Cole feels apt, as both writers share a kind of curiosity about solitude and cities, and both treat stillness as a way of seeing.

Lonely People Meet is not a novel of great dramatic turns; it is about the small tremors that run beneath our lives and makes for a good read. It asks what happens when we begin to question the truth of our memories and feelings.

The reviewer is the author of Patna Blues *and* A Man from Motihari.

New life into old narratives

Prateek Dasgupta excavates stories of lesser-known civilisations from the past



Archaeologists have unearthed some 30 sites belonging to the Caral-Supe civilisation in the arid region between the Peruvian coast and the Andean foothills. (GETTY IMAGES)

Sudhirendar Sharma

With a postgraduate degree in Materials Science from Pennsylvania State University, Prateek Dasgupta took it upon himself to pull ancient history out of the conventional narrative filled with myths and legends. Not only does he connect the ancient past's forgotten chapters with archaeological evidence from the Ice Age to the Middle Ages, but he also celebrates many underappreciated lives.

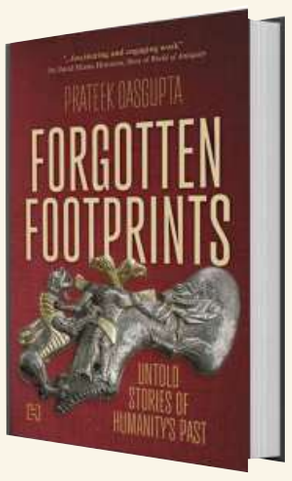
The common perception that hunter-gatherers began agriculture and started settled habitation after the Ice Age, some 12,000 years ago, may have been put to rest. Excavations and studies have shown that one of the earliest known human settlers was called the Gravettians, who lived in Europe and Russia in the Old Stone Age between 33,000 years and 21,000 years ago. During the Gravettian period, researchers found that nine separate cultures existed across Eurasia. The term "Gravettian" comes from the La Gravette archaeological site in France, where tools typical of their culture, like stone blades with sharp and blunted edges, were first found in 1880. This remarkable invention, writes Dasgupta, helped them hunt megafauna, "a game-changer in human evolution." The discovery, however, led to more questions: how, for example, did humans struggling for survival during the Ice Age invent such excellent tools?

Pyramids in Peru

Forgotten Footprints is unlike other history books; in four sections it stitches together multi-disciplinary stories that ignite interest and spark curiosity in readers. Written history may have ignored many voices from the past but the civilisations uncovered in this book provide new insights into humanity's past, and offer conflicting theories about the whys and the hows.

For instance, archaeologist Ruth Shady Solis' discovery led to the world realising that one of the earliest known pyramids were first built in Peru. To date, archaeologists have unearthed some 30 sites belonging to the Caral-Supe civilisation in the arid region between the Peruvian coast and the Andean foothills. Though one may not get to see imposing structures, archaeological evidence confirms the structures to be located in the centre of Caral, allowing society's elite to monitor the city's functioning.

Dasgupta has breathed new life into these ancient histories. History had captivated him since childhood, notable being the headless statue of king Kanishka who ruled much of Central Asia and northern India from the first to the third century BCE. Although Kanishka is a popular name in India, little is known about this mysterious ruler and his ancestors. The author draws attention on many such lesser-known entities to understand what political, environmental,



Forgotten Footprints
Prateek Dasgupta
Hachette India
₹699

and socioeconomic risks they faced. The rise and fall of civilisations should remind readers about the fragility of modern society, and how many of the old problems continue to plague us even today.

Written in an engaging style, *Forgotten Footprints* takes readers across different time zones. In each of the 17 chapters in the book, there are interesting human-interest stories. The author might want some of the chapters to be developed into independent books to recreate the history of ancient civilisations in detail. The liberal use of photographs, maps and illustrations are a visual delight, adding depth to a fascinating subject.

The reviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic.

Manish Gaekwad with his mother Rekhabai; and (below) the author. (MANISH GAEKWAD, AMIT SADANA)

Nandini Bhatia

IN CONVERSATION

HIS OWN STORY

A son gets closure after writing about his mother and his life in the *kothas*

Gaekwad has found closure in the two memoirs. "No more *kothas* for me. It's a relief to get it all done and out," he says

The first time Manish Gaekwad wrote about his mother and her life in the *kothas* of Bombay and Calcutta was back in 2018, in a blog post. "Ask me more if you are curious. It is not something I am ashamed of, neither should you hesitate," he had written. He has not stopped sharing her story, and by extension his own, ever since.

While *The Last Courtesan* (2023) was Gaekwad's mother Rekhabai's journey into and out of the *tawaif* life, *Nautch Boy* (HarperCollins) is Gaekwad's own, in the shadow (or, perhaps, the bright light) that his mother was. In this second memoir, he returns more resilient, candid, and ever so fluent with the past.

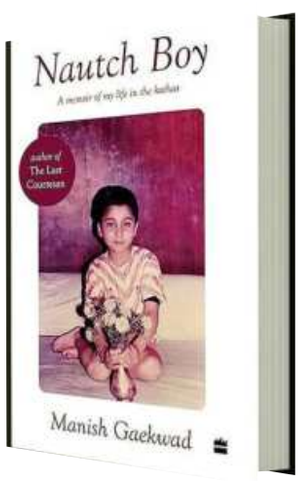
The author-journalist not only preserves the long deserted Bandook Gullies and Bow Bazaars of history in the two memoirs, but uses the power of literary craftsmanship to shorten the distance between his life and his mother's – separated by the education, employment, and opportunities that Rekhabai was never offered.

It is this distance, however, that Gaekwad says has acted as a catalyst, aiding objectivity. "I think my mother and I learnt to give each other more love and respect with that distance. My mother's memoir brought us closer than mother and child – it made us see our lives outside of our relationship, as individuals of our own making first. I got to see her life before me. It made her bond with me less as a mother and more as a friend, a confidante, a chronicler of her story that she wanted to share not just with me but with the world."

He remarks that "extreme proximity blurs vision."

Shaped by violence

This continuity of a writer's aspiration easily becomes a child's closure. While he continues to approach his mother's past with a distinct solemnness and empathy, in *Nautch Boy*, Gaekwad emphasises on the 'violence' of life that shaped his childhood at the *kotha* and outside it, at the Darjeeling boarding school or as an adult, navigating love and work. Why this particular metaphor? "Life is a violent act," he says. "Recollecting violence in my memoir is to remind myself and the reader, perhaps, that despite its brutal and plentiful presence one must respond to it with kindness and forgiveness, because otherwise how else will life be bearable? How will one survive, move on, and make one's life worthwhile? In response to violence, I am not offering my other cheek for another slap. I am trying to smile and step away from it, not prolong it."



This kindness in response to the violence – of words and in the care and affection of his mother – is accompanied by a long line of books and movies that made up Gaekwad (or Monty, as his mother had nicknamed him after Rishi Kapoor's character in the 1980 film, *Karz*).

For Gaekwad, "reading made all the difference," as a "*naazuk* (shy)" boy, through his teen years, and even now, as an adult. As all good writers do, reading one of their works inspires you to read the others.

Although Gaekwad considers it ideal that *The Last Courtesan* be read before *Nautch Boy* to establish context, he is open to new readers finding their way back to his mother's story. "Who came first? The mother or the son?" he asks. It is for the readers to decide. As for what is next, Gaekwad has found closure in the two memoirs. "No more *kothas* for me. It's a relief to get it all done and out. Now it no longer belongs only to me. Hopefully, it is now everyone's who embraces its sorrows and joys similar to their own. Human experience is varied, but feelings, emotions remain the same." He is currently working on a modern fictional love story – "not set in a *kotha*!"

The interviewer is a feature writer.

Delhi, haunted

Two writers go in search of *jinns* and spirits wandering across the city's monuments and homes

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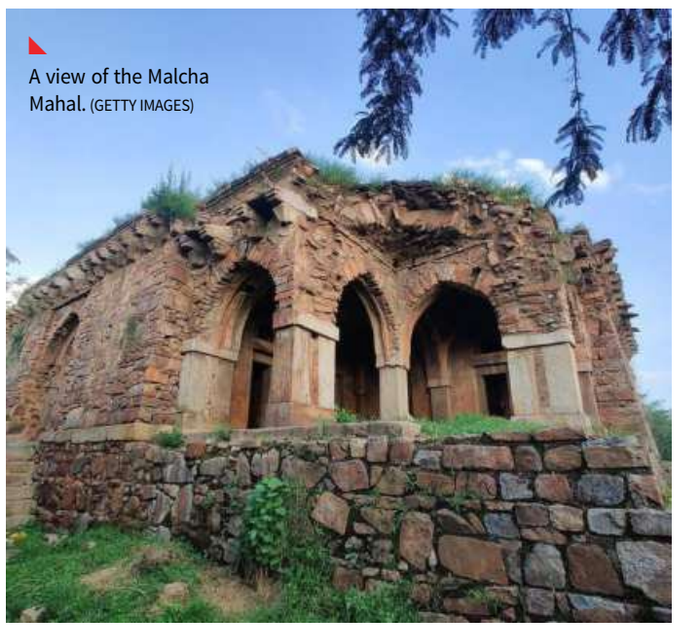
Long before Khushwant Singh wrote about a deity under every other peepal tree in *Delhi: A Portrait,* noted chronicler and *The Hindu* columnist R.V. Smith had carved out a niche, scaring readers with stories of haunted Delhi. In his book, *City of Djinns*, William Dalrymple wrote about his encounter with Pir Sad-rud-Din, who had told him that *jinns* loved Delhi so much they could never bear to see it empty or deserted.

Now, Eric Chopra, founder of Itihāsology, a platform dedicated to Indian history and art, has written a new book, *Ghosted: Delhi's Haunted Monuments*, which takes over from Singh, Smith and Dalrymple's ghostly gossips. Chopra visits the places known to be haunted for centuries and bases his narration on facts, explaining the origins of their names and their layered history. He picks five monuments – Jamali-Kamali, Firoz Shah Kotla, Khooni Darwaza, the Mutiny Memorial and Malcha Mahal – and as he probed deeper, he realised that the "hauntings are not bound by random chance." Their "stories reveal how history lingers, which of its fragments endure, and *who* and *how* we choose to remember."

As children, we were asked to steer clear of the



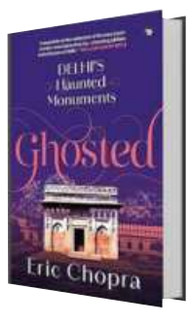
A view of the Malcha Mahal. (GETTY IMAGES)

Jamali-Kamali tomb on a picnic to the famous Qutab Minar; Jamali-Kamali was not just in the same area but replete with tales of a ghost who visited every Thursday. Chopra, however, does go there, helped by a guard. "Do people ask you about the *jinn*?" Chopra asks the guard, who replies, "That's all they mostly ask." The 16th century tomb is located in Mehrauli, which itself is said to be a blessed place, derived from Mehr-e-walis, or blessings of saints. Today, the tomb-mosque compound of Jamali-Kamali is known for its supernatural walks. But Chopra, by interrogating these tales, also brings readers face-to-face with some of the most pressing contemporary debates around history.

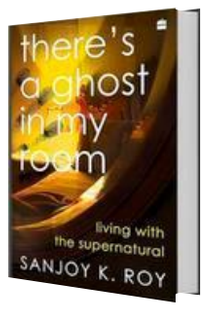
What about Malcha Mahal, a 14th-century hunting lodge built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq? Interestingly, in 1984, it became the 'home' of Begum Wilayat Mahal, who claimed to be a descendant of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Nine years later, the Begum was to end her life by swallowing crushed diamonds. A couple of decades later, her son died a pauper's death, raising several questions. Haunted places revel in questions, and Chopra asks quite a few himself.

The dead amid the living

But Chopra's book is not a chronicle of his supernatural



Ghosted: Delhi's Haunted Monuments
Eric Chopra
Speaking Tiger
₹499



There's a Ghost in My Room
Sanjoy K. Roy
HarperCollins
₹599

experiences at Delhi's monuments; it writes about "stories that possess the power to haunt and shape the way we think about the past." The presence of the unknown, however, is strongly felt in Sanjoy K. Roy's engaging book, *There's A Ghost in My Room)*.

An arts entrepreneur, Roy's book is like a well-crafted horror movie. Roy begins the story of his life quietly, recalling his arrival in the city in 1970 as a school-going boy. Every now and then, he dips into stories about his father, who retired as Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command. Roy writes about his family relocating to Tughlaq Road in the early 1980s, when the hauntings begin.

The Tughlaq Road residence had a "sweeping driveway" and enormous master bedrooms. It was in this house that he was visited by supernatural elements. As Roy writes, "Many a night, I was jolted awake with the sense of an ominous presence looming above me, right next to my bed. I would struggle to break free, my mouth stretching wide open in a scream that remained stuck in my throat even as a dark ginormous energy filled the room, sucking out the oxygen from my lungs."

Could this be because the Tughlaq Road house was built in what was for long a 'bayaban (forest)' where *jinns* supposedly lived and interacted with a wandering dervish or two? Roy doesn't explain. But his tryst with the supernatural continued from Delhi to Rishikesh, Khajuraho to Ladakh, and he has lived through those other-worldly experiences to write about them.

SISTERHOOD IN THE CITY

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

The women, mostly homemakers, knew their politics and stood tall. They braved the cold Delhi winter nights, police barricades, and intimidation, and sat on the road for months, refusing to give up on their rights.

Being there for each other

These initiatives, acts of resistance, and sisterhoods may not dismantle patriarchy, but the shared courage and community-building are helping many women find their voice amid the noise. Sumi Thomas, a member of the Otherwarya group in Kochi, points out that informal sisterhoods like theirs has helped women such as her find a community that shares similar values. "In this digital age, we have become so distant from each other that there is loneliness, but finding this group has helped women realise they are not alone in this. From 20- to 50-year-olds, everybody is going through a similar journey and they have found each other in the process," she says. Thomas adds that the Kochi group, which now has over 80 members, has become a space for shared wisdom where women offer their insights on life to help others get through tough phases. "From opening up about their vulnerabilities to discussing their dating lives and politics, we have done it all."

Within these sisterhoods, women are building parallel spaces where gender roles are not assigned, and choices are being shaped by individual agency. Kavita Krishnan, a Delhi-based women's rights activist, says that the act of creating these spaces is also a political one. "Women are standing up against the patriarchal system and making a conscious choice to be there for other women through various issues in life," she says, pointing out that such groups help women unlearn their own biases and liberate them from the societal shackles and patriarchal rules that hold them back and stunt growth.

And while women remain honest about the unlearning that remains, they are determined to continue to learn, unlearn, and lead in fresh ways – and be there for each other through it all.

When newsrooms are male-dominated and women do not find anyone who has faith in their work, it is a beautiful feeling to have this group of women who believes in you. From sharing resources and fellowship opportunities, advocating for better workplace safety, to standing by survivors of abuse, the group has always come forward for this sisterhood

RAJASHRI DASGUPTA
Founding member of Network of Women in Media, India, which has close to 1,000 members

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

CITES* HAS MOVED ALL MANTA AND MOBULA RAY SPECIES TO APPENDIX-1, OFFERING US THE HIGHEST DEGREE OF PROTECTION FROM BEING OVERFISHED TO EXTINCTION!
WOW! HOW DID THEY FINALLY ARRIVE AT THIS CONSENSUS?
IT'S ALL THANKS TO MARINE RESEARCHERS WHOSE FINDINGS AND PERSISTENCE COMPELLED THE CITES SIGNATORIES TO UNITE AGAINST OUR EXPLOITATION.
I'VE NEVER BELIEVED IN SANTA BUT I'M NOW SURE THERE'S A MANTA CLAUS AMONG THOSE MARINE SCIENTISTS.
*CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Tanushree Ghosh
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WHEN BOLLYWOOD SHOWS UP

How her Hindi-film sorority stands by actor-director Tannishtha Chatterjee through life and her fight against cancer

Tannishtha Chatterjee; and (below) the actor with a few members of the Dher Saara Pyaar group.

On January 17, at poet-lyricist Javed Akhtar's 80th birthday party, Tannishtha Chatterjee had the time of her life, with her girl gang in tow. Three days later, life came knocking with a stopwatch, and the actor-director-playwright "kind of disappeared".

Chatterjee, who was busy with her directorial sophomore *Full Plate*, was diagnosed with stage 4 oligo-metastatic cancer. "My film was in the middle of post-production, and everything fell apart," she says from Thiruvananthapuram, where the film screened in the Indian Cinema Now segment of the International Film Festival of Kerala. "My sister doesn't live in India. I am single (separated from her husband). I felt very lonely at that point. I had lost my father a year back. It was the hardest for my mother, who was still in depression. Also in my care is my (adopted) daughter. Then to get diagnosed (with cancer), I could only humour it; that this drama too needed to happen in my life."

That she could complete the film and face life after her diagnosis, she credits her "sisters". They call the collective the Dher Saara Pyaar (lots of love) group. Veteran actor Shabana Azmi is the "gang leader", and its members include Urmila Matondkar, Sandhya Mridul, Tanvi Azmi, Divya Dutta, Richa Chadha, Vidya Balan, Dia Mirza, Shahana Goswami, and Konkona Sensharma. They call Chatterjee "Tiger Tan".

Together, we thrive

Weeks after her diagnosis, on February 4, Chatterjee did not show up at Matondkar's birthday.

"I decided I would let her celebrate her birthday and then I will tell everybody. But it didn't work out like that. Sandy (Mridul), Richa and others came to know, and then Urmila's party turned into a 'how to help Tannishtha' event," she says.

Chatterjee admits that "sisterhood is a recent discovery" for her. Right from childhood, all her closest friends have been men. But "slowly, as we are growing older, I realised that the kind of compassion and love that you can receive and give (among women) is very different. The other day, Dia called me with a list of numbers, Vidya fixed an appointment and picked me up. Shabana sends me videos of exercises. It's just amazing."

Earlier, this was just a "fun group, where we met, laughed and joked around. But when this happened to me, all of us realised that there is responsibility and care too. It's this group as well as my friends and family who have been so beautifully supportive," shares Chatterjee, who's writing a play on breast cancer, *Breast of Luck*, with actor Sharib Hashmi, who's been a caregiver to his cancer-survivor wife.

(Clockwise from left) Ashoka University, Sonipat; S. Radhakrishnan's papers at the Archives of Contemporary India; and ACI founder-director Deepa Bhatnagar (left) with filmmaker Sai Paranjpye. (COURTESY ASHOKA UNIVERSITY)

WHERE DOCUMENTS SAVE HISTORY

In Haryana, Ashoka University's Archives of Contemporary India now boasts a 100-plus private-paper collection and shows why external funding is crucial for archival work

Aditya Mani Jha

For students of history, making pilgrimages to physical libraries only to find documents, manuscripts, etc. in poor condition on dust-laden shelves is par for the course. Often, these primary source materials have to be digitised and restored before they can be of any use.

This is where the crucially important work of archiving and restoration comes in. Several Indian universities have been making significant strides in archival work. One such is Ashoka University, a private research university in Sonipat, Haryana. Its Archives of Contemporary India (ACI) initiative, started in 2017, has recently crossed 100 private-paper collections.

Collect, filter, disseminate

Over the years, ACI has gathered documents pertaining to the economic reforms of the 1990s, scientific and technological developments, the history of women's rights, the growth of India's media sector, and so on. The collections now include political figures such as S. Radhakrishnan and Manmohan Singh, writers Kiran Nagarkar, Adil Jussawalla and Girish Karnad, journalists Anil Dharker and Nayan Chanda, among others. This initiative is backed on an ongoing basis by HDFC Ltd., with a one-time grant of ₹60 crore for setting up a library and archive on campus, according to a Deloitte report.

Founder-director Deepa Bhatnagar brought to ACI her three-decade experience from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, where she served as head of research and publications. The self-taught archivist has worked on the papers of Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari, et al. She says her "approach remains the same, whether acquiring the papers of a writer, an artist, or a political personality".

Bhatnagar adds, "We begin by studying the life, work, and contributions of the individual to understand the context and significance of their papers and then proceed accordingly with the acquisition process. When the donor is alive, the process involves direct dialogue, through email, phone or in-person meetings to explain the importance of archiving their papers. In cases where the subject is deceased, the discussion happens with the family or legal heirs. In both cases, our goal is to preserve and make accessible material of lasting historical value."

Conservation protocols

"Digitising and preserving old documents is undoubtedly a very challenging task," Bhatnagar says. "Papers often come to us in a fragile condition: torn, brittle, or affected by humidity. At the Archives of Contemporary India, we follow strict conservation protocols: use acid-free folders and boxes, temperature-controlled storage, and high-resolution, non-invasive digitisation. Photographs are encapsulated in archival polyester covers and stored in specially designed boxes."

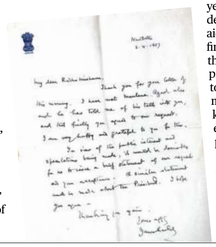
The prepared catalogue of a collection is uploaded to the ACI website, where it is freely available for download; "for access to specific files, a nominal fee is charged," she adds.

Ashoka's efforts are in line with similar initiatives at government-funded colleges. IIT Kharagpur has an enviable free-of-cost digital archive of material pertaining to computer science, mechanical engineering, all the way to literary, religious and philosophical texts.

Archiving matters

For someone writing a thesis on Indian cinema history over the last 50 years, the personal correspondence of, say, Sai Paranjpye, the only woman directing Bollywood films in the 1980s (*Sparsh*, *Chashme Buddoor*, *Katha*), will be of import. Or a compilation of a record of presidential tenures in independent India will need the official correspondence of S. Radhakrishnan.

Given the range of texts available in a professionally managed archive – newspaper interviews, audio recordings of long-forgotten speeches, photographs of international conclaves and informal get-togethers of high-profile people – it is clear why entities like ACI are valuable to students, researchers, independent scholars, both domestic and foreign. "Earlier there was a point of view that archival work only matters for students or specialists," says Prof. Abhijit Gupta of Jadavpur University (JU), a State-funded technical university in Kolkata. "But I feel that we have to move away from this view now and think in terms of public interest. After COVID, we (JU) have made a significant portion of our archives freely accessible, and we have organised 'open days'. We have held events and workshops where we teach people simple archival practices they can use to preserve family memories, old photographs that have sentimental value, and so on."



JU's School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR) 'Bichitra' archive is a comprehensive collection of Rabindranath Tagore's works available freely in Bangla, English and Hindi. It was created in collaboration with Visva-Bharati University and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. Prof. Gupta says they have "archived and digitised several out-of-print Bengali children's magazines and comics" over the last decade.

While ACI's work is impressive and looks set for aggressive expansion in the years ahead, it is crucial to democratise knowledge and aid the development of first-generation scholars. For that, society must back similar projects at public universities too – politically, financially, morally – lest all research and knowledge-gathering endeavours be restricted to a privileged few.

The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.

POLITICS ON MY PLATE

From food-themed projects to commentaries on governance, migration, ecology and erasure at the 10th Serendipity Arts Festival

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Who makes our salt? What is the skill needed to make it? Where does it come from? At *Salt*, one of the 250-plus projects of the Serendipity Arts Festival in Panjim, Prahlad Sukhtankar, sommelier and founder of The Black Sheep Bistro in Goa, invites participants to immerse themselves in stories of Indian salts. As part of the experience, they can dip into bowls of 16 types of salt. "In Tamil Nadu, salt is culture," one photo-story says, detailing how fish and meat are salted, how it is offered to deities, and brought into the house by a bride. "*Sambalam*, meaning wages, derives from the combination of *samba* (paddy) and *alam* (saltpan)," a note tells us.

After an eight-month-long research with communities that make salt, Sukhtankar says what annoyed him the most was either a total disinterest in the everyday ingredient or a reverence for salts that came from abroad. American journalist and author Mark Kurlansky barely mentions India in his book *Salt: A World History* (2003), he says.

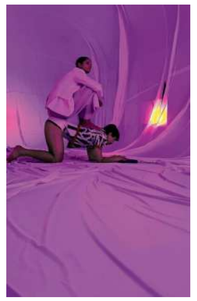
No one anticipated how salt pans would come into focus, when, on December 6, a couple of weeks before Serendipity, 25 people died in a fire at a Goa bar, with allegations that it was built illegally, on a salt pan.

Sukhtankar hopes the message people will take away is that "we don't look at salt pans as empty plots of land waiting for development. It is a living intelligent ecosystem that we need to nurture and protect, and it will do the same in return".

At the Serendipity Arts Festival, now in its 10th year, festival director Smriti Rajgarhia says, curators – this time over 35, expanding from the usual 10-12 – were given 10 "curatorial parameters", including addressing local concerns and appealing to the youth.

In fact, they only enunciate themes that the news throws up: of migration, oppression and war. For instance, in curator Ranjit Hoskote's *Otherland*, which exhibits works by a group of four photographers, Ram Rahman addresses issues of human rights violations, through images of protest from the streets of New York, against Israel's offences in Gaza. 'Dump Trump & Mulch Musk' says one poster within the photograph. Samar Jodha's *Narratives of the Nameless*, about 3,500 passport photographs of migrant workers from 30-35 countries, who built the world's tallest structure, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, forces viewers to think of labour and the loss of identity.

(Clockwise from left) A poster on seeds, part of the project *What Does Loss Taste Like?*, artist Samar Jodha with his *Narratives of the Nameless* exhibit; *You, Beauty*, a performance by Melbourne-based Chunky Move; and artist Jayasimha Chandrashekar printing 'Every day is a cliché' on his litho press, part of *Multiplay 02*. (ROHIT CHAWLA, THOMAS ZACHARIAH AND THE LOCAVORE, SERENDIPITY ARTS)



Today, here, now

At the heritage Directorate of Accounts, one of the 13 locations in an 8km radius, Jayasimha Chandrashekar, a Bengaluru-based artist, uses a litho press, an over-200-year-old technology, to print the phrase 'Every day is a cliché', on the day's newspaper. The ink goes across headlines that speak about the Special Intensive Revision, Trump's visa fee, Goa's nightclub blaze.

"The performance opens up layers: old rhythms of work, labour that is disconnected from the end product, the insignificance of news in a paid-media landscape, and the noise around news," says Sumir Tagra, of the Gurugram-based artist duo Thukral and Tagra. A part of *Multiplay 02* – a segment that started last year – their curation spans eight adaptive spaces or "soft systems", offering "new ways of seeing and being".

In *You, Beauty*, a performance by Melbourne-based Chunky Move, an inflatable expands and shrinks, much like the sea, sometimes rising to the rafters, sometimes flowing so close to the audience in a room lined with now-empty wooden cabinets. Through a puncture, viewers glimpse the innards of the inflatable, a couple of people manipulating its movement, a reminder of the innards of government agencies that control.

One way governments control citizens is through surveillance. In Prajakta Potnis' *Elegy in Light*, set on a retired barge, a moving spotlight highlights an iron chain, a worker's shirt, and other everyday maritime objects. "While historically, lighthouses were considered beacons of safe passage, they have emerged as a contested symbol... Their primary function is now to act as surveillance beams," says the project description.

Past forward

"Sometimes the future answers in whispers, not shouts," says 'Dr Bwanga' over a phone, as part of a generative AI counselling session in the Lusaka-based artist Benny Blow's own voice. 'Dr Bwanga' offers 'consultations' in a phone booth, and the wisdom is based on the artist's research into Zambia's traditional healers.

This reclamation of indigenous knowledge and nature is also visible at *Lost Fish Recipes*. At the entrance of the century-old Government Medical College, participants are encouraged to play a game of dice: one die is a fish, another a flavour, and a third, a cooking method. People can formulate a recipe putting together the three. Biswajit Das, one of its creators, says the project was rooted in the drying up of the Kulsi river, because of excessive sand mining, bridges built over it and weather change. "The fish started disappearing, and with it the fishermen."

What Does Loss Taste Like? is a multi-disciplinary immersive experience about the future of food, curated by Chef Thomas Zacharias and The Locavore, a food movement, in collaboration with Immerse, an immersive-experience production company, and theatre company QTP. It presents a speculative journey into the year 2100, with cubes of food instead of food as we know it. Here, food is stripped of memory and aroma, and soil stripped of nutrients. It is about loss, the loss of soil, and with that, the loss of plant and diversity. Zacharias' team tells participants that in that year, there will be, "One seed, one outcome. Every time!"

Zacharias says, "After a decade of travelling through India's food systems, sitting with farmers, fishers, cooks, and producers, and hearing the same quiet grief surface again and again, it was increasingly obvious to me that something fundamental is slipping away. I realised loss wasn't abstract – it was deeply physical, emotional, and lived. *What Does Loss Taste Like?* tries to translate that into an experience, so we don't just understand what's disappearing, but actually feel it viscerally, and are nudged to do something about it."

POP-A-RAZZI

Is culture up for grabs?

When a U.K. outlet's patent claim on '*sabzi*' sparked controversy over cultural ownership and appropriation

Eat your veggies." That's an admonition many of us have grown up with. But now a deli in Cornwall in the U.K. wants to have its *sabzi* and eat it too. And let no one else have any.

Recently, Yasmin Khan, who is of Pakistani and Iranian origin, was about to publish a book of vegetarian recipes. In a nod to her cultural heritage, she called the book *Sabzi*, the word for vegetables in both Pakistan and Iran and other swathes of the world.

Her publisher then got a letter from a lawyer asking Khan to cease and desist, and pulp any copies of her book. It turns out the Cornwall deli had already patented the word '*sabzi*'. The owner, a contestant on BBC's *Masterchef*, had named her deli Sabzi and accused Khan of copying her brand and infringing on her intellectual property. The book had to be removed from Amazon.

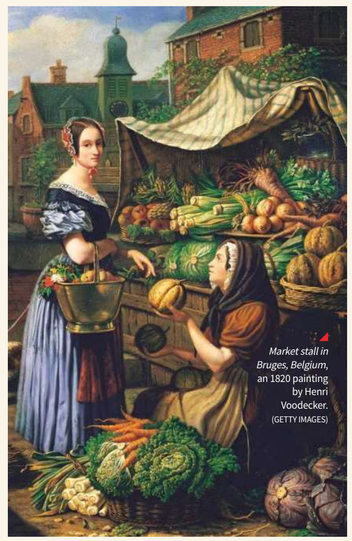
It seemed like the most absurd case of cultural appropriation; it seems ludicrous that a word as basic as *sabzi* can even be copyrighted. But the owner of the deli rejected the claim of cultural appropriation because she herself is partly of Iranian heritage. That actually made it worse. It would be one thing for a clueless person from a different culture to try and copyright a common world like curry or *dosa* but someone of West Asian heritage should definitely know better.

Then the deli's landlord, which happened to be the Duchy of Cornwall aka the private estate for Prince William, also sent a letter in its support. It was, Khan wrote in *The Guardian*, "a plot twist so colonial that (she) had to check whether the East India Company had been revived".

In the end, it all fizzled out. Faced with a barrage of criticism, the deli backed down and Khan's book returned to Amazon.

From basmati to yoga

But this tempest in a crockpot shows that despite years of multiculturalism, it is easy to establish ownership over a piece of someone else's culture. As cookbook writer Rukmini Iyer wrote in support of Khan on her sub stack, "Over one billion people use the word '*sabzi*' daily. And they aren't talking about a deli." Yet, some authority granted this person the right to corner *sabzi* for her own personal use. And a legion of her supporters in Cornwall got excited enough to pillory Khan for daring to use a term that was a part of her own cultural roots. Khan wrote she suddenly found herself the target of an angry campaign – "they were all women, all white and all from Cornwall".



Market stall in Bruges, Belgium, an 1820 painting by Henri Voodecker. (GETTY IMAGES)

Sabzi-gate has precedents. American company RiceTec received a patent for 'Basmati rice lines and grains' in 1997 provoking angry reactions from India and Pakistan. Eventually, the patent over the generic 'basmati' name was revoked by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in 2001. A British-owned Vietnamese restaurant tried to patent the word *pho*, Vietnam's iconic noodle soup. The controversy erupted when restaurant Pho, which is white-owned, sent a cease-and-desist notice to a small Vietnamese-owned cafe in London, Mo Pho Viet Cafe.

But it's not always about white vs. brown. While Bikram Choudhury was not allowed to trademark a sequence of yoga *asanas*, he managed to trademark the name Bikram Yoga. But the Indian government set up a task force to prevent the U.S. Patent Office from allowing more yoga-related copyrights.

Sometimes the patent battle goes the other way. Escalator and Jacuzzi started out life as registered word trademarks but became so successful that they became the generic names for any moving staircase and hot water pools with jets.

A new colonialism

The current backlash against multiculturalism makes everything worse. It suggests nobody has the need to educate themselves about the culture of the other. It allows for a new kind of colonialism where a business can take advantage of general cultural myopia and copyright traditional foods and knowledge as long as they are the first mover. As if taking the Koh-i-noor was not enough. Now they are greedy for the humble *sabzi* as well. What's next? Chai? Masala? Masala chai?

***Sandip Roy**, the author of* Don't Let Him Know, *likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.*

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 22

ARE WE IN A QRISIS?

It's each man for himself in the digital age of QR codes and OTPs

Dear readers, today I ask you to throw your mind back to the good old days of going to a restaurant with your family or friends in order to partake of food and beverages.

There you would be sitting in the living room, minding your own business, doing childhood things such as playing a board game, or watching a TV programme, or reading a copy of Dante's *Inferno* in the original Tuscan dialect of the Italian language. In the background, you can hear your father and mother having a private discussion in the kitchen.

Suddenly your father will explode into the living room and announce: "Children, please change into your 'outside' clothes. Your mother and I have decided that we are going to a restaurant for dinner!"

"Hallelujah, praise the Lord!" my brother would exclaim. "Mamma mia!" I would join in.

Why were both of us so happy? Because earlier that day, we had seen our father return from the market with ladiesfinger and green beans. And we had mentally resigned to a dinner of rice, pickle, curd, and stir-fried foliage.

Are we going for pizza, we would ask my father, or burger? Chinese?

No, my father would say gravely. We were going to have a healthy vegetarian *thali* at the family-favourite vegetarian restaurant that had the same menu, cutlery and interior decoration since the time when Cornwallis was the Governor-General.

Little did we know that we were witnessing the golden age of hospitality. Because the moment we reached the restaurant, a smart waiter would usher us to a table and immediately place four menus in front of us, along with a steel jug of water and several veteran tumblers. Less than 15 minutes later, we would all be tucking into veritable mountains of steaming hot food.

Readers, that golden age is slowly slipping away.

Earlier this week, I went to a restaurant by myself. I settled down at a table and then waited 10 minutes for one of the wait staff to pay me attention. Finally, one young lady came over and said if I had any questions.

Yes, I said. "Where is the menu?"

She looked at me with thinly veiled disgust and then pointed at a sticker on the table. "Please scan the QR code for the menu," she said, and then immediately vanished without a trace.

I pulled out my phone, and after some inconvenience, managed to scan the QR code only to realise that there was no mobile signal inside the dining room. Thankfully, the restaurant had free wifi. Finally, after a full 15 minutes of fiddling with my phone, I was able to scan the QR code, peruse the digital menu, choose my dishes, enter my table number, and place my order.

Within a mere six minutes, yet another member of staff appeared and placed two drinks and three dishes on my table. Not a single one of which I had ordered. Apparently, there had been some confusion with the table numbers. The comestibles were whisked away to their rightful patrons.

Eventually, my food was served. And I ate very quickly. And then I made elaborate Kathakali-level hand gestures before yet another staff member extended an audience.

"Can I have the bill, please?" I asked. "Please scan the QR code again for your bill," he said. "Oh, I can use it to pay the bill also?" I asked. But no-one was there to answer because the young man vanished like Anil Kapoor in the film *Mr. India*.

Now at this point, you readers are thinking, boss just scan the QR code and pay and leave, no?

No. Because at this point, my phone ran out of battery. So, it took me another 15 minutes to charge my phone, scan the code, pay my bill, and then finally leave the restaurant.

Friends, look. You will rarely find a person who is as open-minded about modern technology as this writer. I love the Internet, I adore mobile phones, and recently, I have started using Artificial Intelligence for critical business use such as, "Gemini, can you take this passport photo of mine and reduce baldness, please?"

But sometimes technology can cross the line and enforce inconvenience in the name of revolution. QR code menus, QR code bills, digital boarding passes, self-checkout counters in shops, OTPs, should all be banned from the surface of the Earth.

This is why we need a word to describe such technological misadventures that hamper rather than enhance modern life: app-ocalypse.

Example sentence: "Total app-ocalypse happened when the school told parents that henceforth all exam results would be uploaded on a website that would be easily accessible using an email address and then an OTP and then a school login and student id, followed by a secret password. Parents are now approaching the Supreme Court for relief."

Have you been a victim of app-ocalypse recently? Did some stupid code create any QRisis? Please leave comments or send me an electronic mail urgently.

App-ocalypse
/ˌæpəˈkælɪps/
noun
Definition: A technological solution that promises convenience and efficiency but instead creates chaos, frustration, and significantly more inconvenience than the traditional method it replaced.
Related forms:
App-ocalyptic (*adjective*): Describing technology that creates app-ocalypse conditions.
App-ocalyptist (*noun*): A person or organisation that inflicts app-ocalypses upon unsuspecting customers.

***Sidin Vadukut** helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Tough play to make

East-West vulnerable, North deals

Bob Jones

South in today's deal was Australian Joe Haffer. North-South were playing negative doubles, as most do these days, so South's free bid of one spade promised at least five spades.

East won the opening heart lead and cashed another high heart. He was end-played at this point and had no good exit, so he tried the eight of diamonds. Haffer captured West's jack with dummy's ace and took some time to think. East's aggressive bidding, thought Haffer, marked him with both black kings. Neither finesse was likely to be successful, so Haffer took neither one. He cashed dummy's ace of spades and led a diamond to his queen. He led a diamond to dummy's 10 as East shed a heart. Haffer discarded a club on the king of diamonds and led a spade from dummy. East won with the king but had to lead a club from the king of clubs or yield a ruff-sluff. 10 tricks either way. Nicely played!

Haffer played the hand well, but the defense might have prevailed. The East-West methods were that West's eight-of-hearts lead was either from a short suit or included the 10. East could have risked leading a low heart at trick two. West would take his 10 and surely find the winning club shift. Maybe next time.

NORTH
♠ A Q 7
♡ 9 6
◇ A K 10 4
♣ A J 4 3

WEST
♠ 5 4 3
♡ 10 8 2
◇ J 7 6 5
♣ 6 5 2

EAST
♠ K 6
♡ A K Q J 4 3
◇ 8 2
♣ K 9 8

SOUTH
♠ J 10 9 8 2
♡ 7 5
◇ Q 9 3
♣ Q 10 7

The bidding:

NORTH	EAST	SOUTH	WEST
1◇	1♡	1♠*	Pass
2♡	3♡	Pass	Pass
4♠	All pass		

*Promises 5 spades

Opening lead: Eight of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about crosswords

Berty Ashley

Will Shortz, *The New York Times* crossword puzzle editor, graduated from Indiana University with a degree in the study of puzzles. (GETTY IMAGES)

1 On December 21, 1913, the *New York World* published a diamond-shaped puzzle with 32 clues by journalist Arthur Wynne. It had a title that referenced the nature of the puzzle. Unfortunately, due to a typesetting error, the order got mixed up and has been referred to by a different name ever since. What was the original title of this puzzle?

2 On February 5, 2022, the NYT crossword had an across clue by Stephen McCarthy: 'The better of two sci-fi franchises'. It was a quantum puzzle as either of the two answers would have worked. What are the two options that both start with the same four letters and involve interstellar adventures?

3 Leonard Dawe, a school headmaster in Surrey, compiled the crossword for *The Daily Telegraph*. In May 1944, his puzzles had answers such as 'Utah, Omaha, Neptune and Overlord'. This got the British Secret Service suspicious, and they interrogated him for espionage. Later, it turned out that by coincidence, they were codewords in a historic military operation. What was the event?

4 Of the many types of crosswords, the most popular in Commonwealth countries is where the clues themselves are puzzles. There will be an element of wordplay, and a definition which is a direct reference to the answer. What term is given to these crosswords: "Puzzling – like this clue (7 letters)"?

5 The term for the white squares in a crossword puzzle doesn't come from their colour, but the fact that they give a clue to the answer. What term is this, which is – "Not heavy, but bright" (5)?

6 Crossword setters use many clever ways to point the player towards the answer. One wordplay is indicated by words such as 'scrambled' or 'mutated'. What word play is this, seen in clues like: "Pay attention to silent moves (6)"?

7 Will Shortz, *The New York Times* crossword puzzle editor, graduated from Indiana University with a degree in the study of puzzles. '____tology' was coined by him, and he is currently the only one with this degree. What is the term, which can also be described as "Mystery rearranged in game (6)"?

8 Another form of wordplay is to hide the answer within the clues. What form of clueing is this: "All clever riddles often seem to intimidate, confuse beginners" – that's a type of clue! (8)

9 Though there might be a lot of wordplay in a cryptic crossword, the clue must read like a normal sentence. The term given to this refers to the appearance presented by the clue: "Exterior of car fuse, after melting (7)". What term is this?

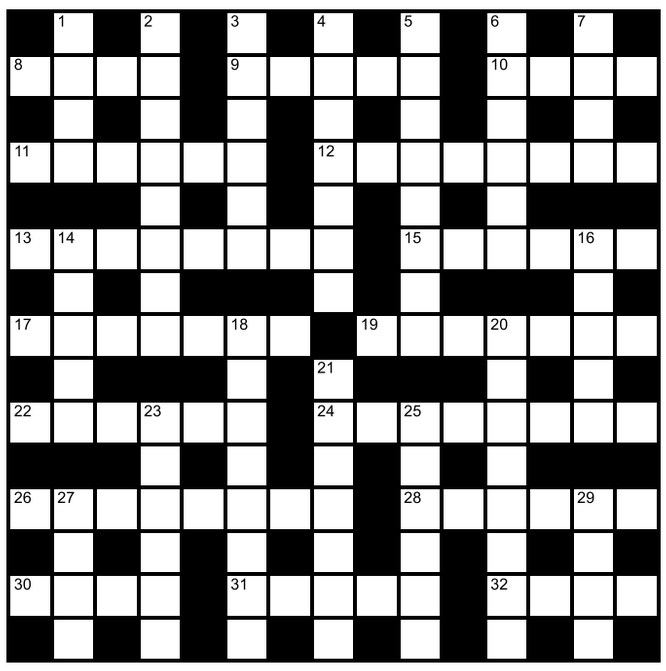
10 An interesting convention while setting crosswords has its roots in its aesthetic appeal. It ensures the puzzle still works if the newspaper is turned away, but also ensures consistency in word length. What convention is this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Word-Cross
2. *Star Wars*/ *Trek*
3. D-Day landings during World War II
(Overlord and Neptune
being names of the operations)
4. Cryptic crosswords
5. Light
6. Anagrams (silent — listen)
7. Enigma-tology (anagram of 'in game')
8. Acrostic (all the first letters of the clue)
9. Surface (anagram of 'car fuse')
10. Grids are symmetrical (same when seen upside down)

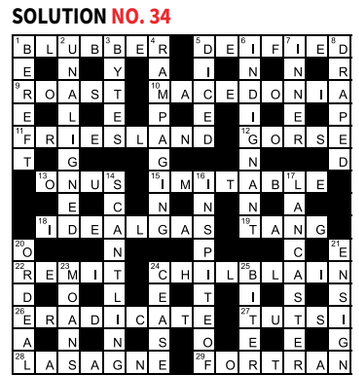
THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 35 (Set by Incognito)



Across
8 Elevated part of Philly (4)
9 Cold rodent starting to explore box (5)
10 City in almanac reference (4)
11 A public representative follows Supreme Court instruction initially to produce seafood preparation (6)
12 Bait chum prepared can be somewhat excessive (1,3,4)
13 Odd to include part of lever and choke (8)
15 Very good employee in the bottling department (6)
17 Old question for naturist (7)
19 Drink with actor's tutor (7)
22 Fly flying tests at beginning of examination (6)
24 Essentially firm attire may irk (8)
26 Rat spreading ale around salver (8)
28 Doves flying around setter in reels (6)
30 Therefore, District Attorney gets a drink (4)
31 Capital captured by Sam Manekshaw? (5)
32 Raise from 51 feet (4)

Down
1 Metal from Zulu incorporated (4)
2 Graphite sphere placed behind fruit container (8)
3 Pretending giant is dancing around college (6)
4 Bear and cat dance in show (7)
5 Medico is confused about pedestrian (8)
6 Ruler's Maruti is driven around (6)
7 Reptile after losing considerable length from its full form when Odile leaves (4)
14 Model lines on graph depicts government revenue (5)
16 Put effort and remove bolt when redesigning letter box (5)
18 Usual sort of light appearing in a dye being spread (8)
20 Excitedly it scaled forts (8)
21 Perhaps, television set and radio tuned by a mother (7)
23 Stitching material used in cloth ready (6)
25 Vanara irritated Lankan king (6)
27 Cupid crushed ores (4)
29 Popular aquarium fish having goldfish head is with European (4)

SOLUTION NO. 34



Elusive peace

Entire communities across most continents are trapped in cycles of violence that destroy crops, disrupt supply chains, wipe out livelihoods, and force families into starvation

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ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

In an age marked by rapid technological progress and instant global communication, the world paradoxically appears more fragile than ever. The dream of peaceful coexistence – once considered humanity's natural aspiration – now stands overshadowed by conflict, fear, and a disturbing decline in empathy. From rising intolerance to the spread of destructive technologies, the question looms large: will we ever return to a peaceful world? And most important, have we lost our concern for human lives?

Never before have people been so interconnected. Yet beneath this digital closeness lies an emotional distance. Tragedies unfold before our eyes every day – wars, bombings, mass shootings, displacement, and suffering. This constant exposure has created a strange paradox: we see more, but we feel less. Compassion fatigue is real, and many find themselves desensitised by the overwhelming frequency of human tragedy. But beyond emotional numbness lies another growing crisis: the silent suffering of millions caught in poverty and hunger due to prolonged conflicts.

Entire communities across most continents are trapped in cycles of violence that destroy crops, disrupt supply chains, wipe out livelihoods, and force families into starvation. Children go to bed hungry, parents struggle to find clean water, and humanitarian aid becomes a lifeline that is often blocked, delayed, or politicised. Hunger – once a purely economic issue – has increasingly become a weapon of war.

Darkest shadow

Among the many threats to global harmony, terrorism remains one of the most brutal and disruptive forces. Its impact goes far beyond immediate destruction. Terrorism thrives on fear. Unlike traditional warfare, it targets the most vulnerable – ordinary citizens going about their daily lives. Train stations, schools, markets, temples, airports – no place is immune. The randomness of these attacks creates a climate where safety feels like a distant luxury. The psychological impact is immense. Survivors battle trauma, families grapple with grief, and entire communities live under a cloud of anxiety. Children raised in conflict-hit regions grow up scarred, their innocence stolen by violence they do not understand.

The social consequences are equally damaging. Terrorism intentionally fractures societies, creating suspicion between communities and widening religious and ethnic divides. Economically, nations bleed. Tourism collapses, industries suffer, and governments divert enormous funds to security. Hard-earned freedoms – movement, privacy, expression – come under pressure as states tighten surveillance. In many parts of the world, terrorism forces millions from their homes, creating refugee crises that strain already fragile global resources. Displacement fuels poverty and hunger, turning once-thriving towns and villages into zones of scarcity.

Nuclear and biological warfare

If terrorism tears communities apart, nuclear and biological weapons threaten humanity at its core. A single nuclear explosion can flatten cities, destroy ecosystems, and leave a legacy of radiation that lasts for centuries. Even the possibility of nuclear confrontation keeps global tensions alive. Biological weapons are even more sinister. Invisible, contagious, and uncontrollable, they can spread across continents before they are detected.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how vulnerable the world is to microscopic threats; a deliberate biological attack could be unimaginably catastrophic. These weapons do not just kill – they destabilise societies, cripple economies, and push vulnerable populations deeper into hunger and poverty as supply chains collapse and governments struggle to cope.

Human compassion is not gone – it is simply overshadowed by the noise of violence. Peace is not a distant dream; it is a collective responsibility. A safer world demands global cooperation to control dangerous technologies; leadership that values life over power

Technology has entered the battlefield in ways once confined to science fiction. AI-guided smart weapons and autonomous drones can strike with precision, often without warning. While these devices claim to reduce "human error", they also remove human conscience from the decision-making process. Warfare becomes easier to wage, less personal, and dangerously unrestrained. Cyberattacks can shut down hospitals, power grids, banking systems, and essential services without firing a single bullet, paralysing societies and often cutting off access to food, water, and life-saving medical care.

Despite these dark realities, it would be unfair to conclude that humanity has lost its soul. In every crisis, acts of extraordinary courage and kindness emerge. Volunteers rush to disaster zones, strangers shelter refugees and Doctors work tirelessly in war-torn regions. Human compassion is not gone – it is simply overshadowed by the noise of violence. And yet, the world must acknowledge a harsh truth: the suffering of the poor, the hungry, and the displaced rarely receives the urgency it deserves. Their struggles are often reduced to statistics rather than treated as human tragedies.

Peace is not a distant dream; it is a collective responsibility. A safer world demands global cooperation to control dangerous technologies; leadership that values life over power; investment in education that teaches empathy; policies that ensure food security and protect vulnerable communities; and societies that choose dialogue over division. Technology must be guided by ethics, not ambition. Nations must choose negotiation over aggression. Individuals must choose understanding over hate.

History shows that humanity often finds its greatest strength in times of darkness. The desire for harmony, though shaken, remains alive in millions of hearts. Peace is not something we return to; it is something we must build anew. As long as compassion, courage, and hope endure – even quietly – the possibility of a peaceful world will never disappear.

A tale of two birthdays

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I celebrate two birthdays. I didn't give it much thought while growing up because I belonged to a generation which did not celebrate birthdays.

As everyone else in the world, from the day I was born till the day I joined school, I had only one birthday. But since my parents did not come to my school, the person who admitted me gave a random date as my date of birth. My first "official" birthday celebration happened among my colleagues when I was almost on my way to 40.

Most city-bred colleagues assumed that it was business as usual for me. Little did they know that it was a day of multiple firsts for me – it was not only my first birthday celebration but also the very first time a big chunk of that cake found its way onto my face. And the icing on the cake (pun intended) was that it wasn't even my actual birthday.

So, the answer to the question, "What is your date of birth?", doesn't normally yield an automatic and immediate response from me. The answer comes with a brief pause after my mind processes the context in which it was being asked.

One of my most haunting fears is that my daughter will not remember my official birthday, and hence may come across as an imposter, or even a fraudster if she gives a wrong answer when trying to claim her little inheritance which will be rightfully hers after my passing. As an elephant which boasts two kinds of teeth – one for showing off and the other for work – I happen to have two birthdays. But the one that is being shown off is also the one that is doing the work of getting me a livelihood. I don't think this example is the right one, though.

The crowd mentality

Politics plays foul with gatherings in the name of religion and caste, triggering madness without a method

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ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Being part of a crowd means not being oneself. A crowd is a block, and the block conceals its bricks. The hidden bricks lose their form and colour, after being cemented into a structure. If the structure is not well built, it falls sooner or later. When the structure collapses, the bricks collapse too.

Is the crowd ever proud of its own gathering? A gathering never gathers to show its own might. Any huge crowd is being collected for a purpose other than its own needs, except on occasions of protests when the crowd has to exhibit its strength mobilised to clinch any or many of its burning demands. On all other occasions, the collection of a crowd generally represents the gloating pride of politics, religion, and cinema.

When Julius Caesar was killed by an act of betrayal, a huge crowd gathered in Rome and the chief beneficiary of the event was Mark Antony, whose tricky, manipulated speech of powerful eloquence, drove the crowd against Marcus Brutus, the guiltiest betrayer of trust, in the assassination of Caesar.

Until the middle of the last century, the crowds collected, came on their own intent, and were not either paid crowds or frenzied crowds. Most were passionate crowds with varied objectives, such as quest for freedom, love for ideologies, and respect for individuals who represented the ideologies in thought, word and deed.

Now ideology exists as idol worship and hero worship, but hardly as a celebration of profound pathways of a value-based life. In a materialistic universe, everything matters, be it religion or politics, or business or filmdom. God matters in religion. Leaders matter in politics, and film heroes matter as leaders. Materialism creates a kind of madness, but as Lord Polonius says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "though this be madness, yet there is method in it".

Madness without method means chaos. Being in a crowd does not mean being mad. But if a crowd is a catalyst of madness, it ceases to be a meaningful crowd but turns into a mad mob. A mad mob is worse than malignant cancer. In terms of John Milton's poem *Lycidas*, it is "As killing as the canker to the rose". Unfortunately, the cause for this cancer is not the crowd. When Mark Antony pulled a crowd to turn against the killers of Caesar, the cause was just, though the end result was the benefit that went to the formation of the second triumvirate of Rome, consisting of the triple pillars, Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus.

Now everywhere, politics plays foul with the crowd, in the name of religion, caste and cosmetic pull. Corruption does not affect the crowd. But the other three factors intoxicate the crowd and trigger madness without a method. The crowd, as bricks, keeps falling one upon the other, to become formless forms of political structures, without any ideological base to sustain the structure. Being a crowd now means, being part of a process of illusion and mirage, that appears as miracles of the future.

Being in a crowd does not mean being mad. But if a crowd is a catalyst of madness, it ceases to be a meaningful crowd but turns into a mad mob.

Crowds have no identities of their own, until they fall dead in a stampede and stand fit for different designs of compensation. Everywhere around the world, such crowds fall victim to political road shows, in their hurried moves to have a glimpse of their pet hero, as losers of life in unclaimed wars thrust upon them by global power mongers, and as obsessed devotees at worship spots, to see their invisible deity.

Loss of lives in natural disasters and catastrophes can be attributed to the call of time or destiny. But the loss of lives in stampedes is yet another exercise in suicide, with a "willing suspension of disbelief". It is here the mass of gathering misses its mission and matches its madness with the call of time or destiny. The agents who speculatively collected the innocent crowds, drive their luxury vehicles on their corpses, and reach their political destination to realise their power dreams.

magazine
BLUEPRINTS FOR A REVIVAL

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

The forgotten colour of Indian people, indigo, was one the reasons for uniting the country. ('Blueprints for a revival'; Dec. 14) Indigo is remembered as a protest and a vibrant colour that had significance in both Indian history and tradition.
Abhinav Pynat

The article sharply illuminates the critical link between preserving India's indigenous natural dye and securing rural livelihoods. The renewed global interest, underscored by the work of artists and entrepreneurs, offers more than just aesthetic value; it is a blueprint for ecological and economic sustainability.
A. Myilsami

Taking on society

Sarah Joseph's short stories and novels in Malayalam stand out for their sense of purpose without sacrificing literary sensibilities, and *Stain* is a reflection of those characteristics. ('Fire and brimstone'; Dec. 14) Theological matters cutting across religions have been used by the writer as an effective critique of the ills in society.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

Forgotten history

Victoria Bateman presents a fresh perspective on the role of women in history. ('The invisible half'; Dec. 14) The author has made us think about the gender divide in society. Such objective and meaningful exercises are essential to accept and allow dominant role for women in the days to come.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

The revelation that women have been active participants in economic activity throughout human history must dispel the long-held misconception that women have always been home-bound and that only men have been responsible for economic development.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Humanist view

The interview with Li Chung (Sandi) Pei offers a compelling insight into the legacy of architect I.M. Pei. ('My father, the humanist'; Dec. 14) His 'humanist' perspective is what allowed Pei's structures, like the Louvre Pyramid, to be both monumentally ambitious and deeply contextual.
S.M. Jeeva

Power of humour

G. Sampath hits the nail on the head in the most hilarious manner. ('Waiting for Sanchar Swati'; Dec. 14) This shows the power of humour and its ability to drive home a point more effectively that a piece of serious analysis.
Sumit Sacheti

Mastery over craft

The feature on one of India's most celebrated studio potters presents a vivid picture of three decades of excellence and highlights the craftsmanship that has made Vimoo Sanghvi a force to be reckoned with. ('Vimoo Sanghvi, the clay whisperer'; Dec. 14) What has set her apart is her ability to give full rein to her creative instincts using the experience gained through devotion, concentration and experimentation.
C.V. Aravind

MORE ON THE WEB

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Modern parenthood
Are we safe, clear, intelligent and responsible enough in deciding what is good or bad for our child?
Rishi Kanna

From blessing to investment
The dinner table debate is less about college dreams and more about whether the family can afford the tuition fees
Gopal Krishan Sharma

Beyond motherhood
Motherhood comes in many forms; some nurture lives, others nurture ideas, compassion
Kavitha Prabhakaran

The backyard revolution
Reviving India's smallest farms could be the quiet solution to its deepest agrarian crisis.
Anindita Bhattacharya

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Climate change is creating an unlikely success story in the U.K., with warmer temperatures producing award-winning wines — giving Champagne some stiff competition

UNCORK A SPARKLING ENGLISH

Ruma Singh

It's been 22 years and the quality of English sparkling wine is nothing short of astounding," said acclaimed winemaker Dermot Sugrue when I spoke to him in May. "In this short time, we are able to stand shoulder to shoulder with Champagne." His words proved prophetic. A month later, the Decanter World Wine Awards were announced and Sugrue South Downs' 'The Trouble with Dreams' 2009, won a historic Best in Show award, beating a slew of Champagne brands. In all, the U.K. won 188 medals.

Today, sparkling wine production continues its domination, with Champagne grapes representing over 70% of all vines grown in the U.K. Initially priced on a par with Champagne, it struggled to sell. But as the industry expands, it is now possible to find wines starting from £30 upwards.

Not too long ago, few consumers knew that English wine existed. There had been attempts to make wine in England, but with limited success – owing to its focus on still wines using cold-hardy German hybrid grapes such as Madeleine Angevine, Huxelrebe and Reichensteiner. The wines were thin, highly acidic and lacked balance. The country's famously unpredictable, marginal climate meant that it was too cool, too wet to successfully grow ripe *vitis vinifera* grapes.

So, what changed? The climate did. It began to warm up, and with it came the prospect of better ripening of grapes and less vine disease. And this year, as the holidays draw close, we will be seeing English wines on many celebratory tables.

A check for global warming?

The new era began in the 1980s when the focus turned to sparkling wines, made using traditional Champagne grapes – Pinot Noir, Meunier and Chardonnay – grown on chalky limestone soils. In 1988, Nyetimber, a now-renowned English producer (whose Blanc de Blancs 2016 Magnum was named top sparkling wine this year), decided to plant vines in West Sussex. Soon, it stunned the wine world when its Classic Cuvée 1993 was judged the best in the world at an international competition.

That began what many today call 'the Nyetimber effect': the planting of Champagne grapes to make sparkling wine on soils much like France's Champagne region, using the Champagne method. Emboldened by the opportunity to try their hands at growing wine grapes, a new breed of farmers emerged. Many of them gave up lucrative urban jobs to turn to winemaking. So, it is not surprising to read that the U.K. now boasts 1,104 vineyards, according to WineGB, the trade association for English and Welsh wine. This represents a growth rate of 123% since 2013 – significant especially in 2024 when top world wine regions saw negative growth. English wine saw a 3% growth, with reports placing it as one of the world's fastest growing wine regions.

As Kirsty Goring, brand director of Wiston Estate in West Sussex, points out, unlike Champagne, which is located inland, England is surrounded by water. "Fresh breezes help ward off disease, and being only 5 miles from the sea there are less frost issues." The brand – established in 2006 by her parents Pip and Harry Goring – plants grapes on 30 acres of chalk soil, nestled in their 6,000-acre estate. Adds Tamara Roberts, CEO of Ridgeview Wine Estate, one of the earliest producers along with Nyetimber: "Climate change is impacting all wine regions. This will result in certain regions becoming too hot for viticulture or having to change their winemaking traditions to survive. New regions such as England will become more viable."

Climate change may have had a positive effect in England and Wales, but a closer look at historic winemaking regions reveal that the advantages of warming can as quickly turn to devastation. Burgundy suffers spring frosts, unseasonal rain, and hail, and vines were reportedly afflicted by hydric stress, even sunburn. California has repeatedly been hit by wildfires that impacted up to 80% crop rejection due to smoke taint.

Future-ready with PIWIs

The U.K.'s ability to produce excellent wine is also due to advancing technology in both vineyard and winery. Despite advanced clonal (genetically identical copies) and site selection and new tech, the country's climate remains unpredictable. So, new-age hybrid grape varieties called PIWIs (short for Pilzwiderstandsfähige Reben, German for 'fungus-resistant vines') are being grown and assessed for future use.

Artelium Wine Estate, Ridgeview's neighbour, established in 2018, farms 65 acres in East Sussex. I walked through the sun-dappled vineyards with owner Mark Collins and Poppy the vineyard dog. Under Collins, formerly a tech professional, and his telecom executive wife Julie Bretland, Artelium won awards soon after their 2021 launch, including the title of Supreme Champion at the WineGB Awards 2022. "It sets the bar high," confesses Collins. Artelium grows Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Meunier, and Pinot Gris, besides 20,000 disease-resistant PIWI vines planted in 2020. Collins says, "As we get warmer, there's a risk of it getting wetter too." Unseasonal rainfall means vine diseases could spike, devastating crops – something PIWIs are resistant to.

(Clockwise from left) Harvesting grapes at Wiston Harvest; Julie Bretland and Mark Collins of Artelium; Ridgeview wines; and Dermot and Ana Sugrue. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Champagne comes calling

The ever-growing number of awards and accolades garnered by English sparkling wine has drawn the attention of their famous neighbour across the English Channel — Champagne. In 2015, at a press conference in Westminster Abbey, Champagne Taittinger announced its acquisition of an apple orchard in Kent with 60 hectares planted to vine. The seriousness with which the French were taking this was underlined by their 51% stake in the project. Their first vintage was released in 2024 October, and its Domaine Evremond sparkling wine was released to widespread accolades in March this year. Champagne Pommery's English estate planted in 2017 in Hampshire, boasts of similar chalk that runs through Champagne.

However, some producers have mixed feelings about PIWI grapes. Some, like Wiston Estate and Sugrue South Downs believe that they still lack sufficient finesse, requiring further research. But many admit that the necessity of adopting climate-resistant grapes looms large. There might be little choice, Sugrue admits. "As the climate continues to change, we will have to keep adjusting our rootstocks and clones," he says. "Seasonal vineyard management in general will also have to adapt. PIWIs are getting better with each vintage and research is improving. In the future, it is likely that there will be new PIWI X Vinifera crossings developed suitable for good viticulture."

Big and small success stories

Ridgeview remains focused solely on sparkling wine production. Founded in 1995 by Mike and Chris Roberts, the business is now run by the family's second generation: with Tamara as CEO and Simon Roberts as the winemaker. Recognition came in 2005 when their Bloomsbury NV sparkling 2002 won at the IWSC competition. A year later, their Blanc de Blanc 2002 was picked as Queen Elizabeth II's celebration wine at her 80th birthday banquet. Sales soared, standing at 500,000 in 2023 from 25,000 bottles in their first year.

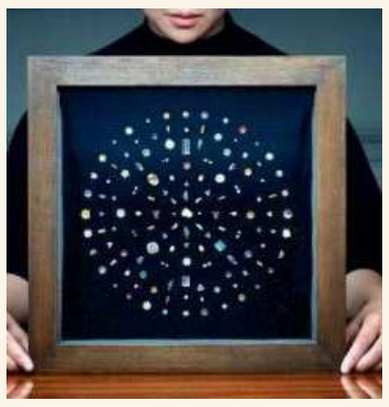
Wiston Estate, on the other hand, has chosen to limit production to under 100,000 bottles. As does Sugrue. Despite his success and cult-like following, his annual production is deliberately small – limited to 20,000 to 50,000 bottles of wine.

The vineyards are also taking sustainability seriously. The Gorings believe looking after nature is the key to ensuring productivity of the land. "Regenerative farming teaches us that everything is better when we work with, rather than against nature," Kirsty says. This sentiment has led to the early success of the Sustainable Wines of Great Britain Scheme, established in 2020 to encourage sustainable farming practices and regenerative farming in the wine industry.

While England is justifiably proud of its industry's accelerated growth, Sugrue underlines the need for a collective strategy and vision for the future. England's wines are unique and tell their own story, he says. That is reason enough to differentiate itself from regions such as Champagne with their legendary quality and scale built over centuries. "Our message should be about making brilliant, quality wines in our own unique style."

The writer is based in Bengaluru.

The stupas of Ratnagiri; and (below) the Piprahwa gems. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



FROM CULT TO CULTURE

Stupas of change

How the dome-shaped monument transformed over time, in both form as well as content

In 1898, William Peppé, a British engineer, excavated the Piprahwa stupa near Siddharthnagar in Uttar Pradesh (nine miles from Lumbini, the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama), and found bone fragments, ashes, and hundreds of gems. The inscription claimed the bones were those of the Buddha himself. These relics were distributed to museums in India and abroad, but a portion of the gems stayed with Peppé's family.

When Sotheby's planned to auction them in Hong Kong in 2025, the Government of India objected, calling them part of its spiritual heritage. The sale was blocked, and eventually the Godrej Group acquired them and brought them back to the country for public display. A 2,200-year-old act of veneration was restored to its rightful place. This incident draws attention to the importance of stupas in ancient India.

The stupa has a long history. And it transformed over time, in form as well as content. In the beginning, the stupa was about the Buddha's body. According to tradition, when the Buddha died, his body was cremated, his relics collected and divided into eight portions and enshrined in different stupas by kings and republics who wanted a share of his presence. Later, Ashoka redistributed these collections to 84,000 sites across India.

Across Southeast Asia – in Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand – there are many great stupas that claim to contain the relics of the Buddha, such as his hair, his nails, and his bone fragments. These were in great demand, exported along with manuscripts to China. Many believed stupas containing the relics had magical powers; they could cure ailments. By the 2nd century AD, stupas at Sanchi, Bharhut and Nagarjunakonda were decorated with elaborate railings and gates showing scenes from the life of the Buddha and the *Jataka Tales*.

A philosophical shift

By the 5th century AD, the Buddha was no longer only in bone and ash – he was in the teaching. Inside stupas, monks began placing stone and terracotta tablets inscribed with the *Pratityasamutpada* formula on dependent origination: "Of those phenomena which arise from causes, the Buddha has explained the causes, and also their cessation." This was a philosophical shift – the stupa now enshrined wisdom, not just relics.

Seeing the dharma became the same as seeing the Buddha. This is when images of Buddha became common. Many bear the same formula carved on their base, turning the image into the "truth body" (*dharmakaya*) of the Buddha. The stupa, thus, became a container of word and image, of memory and meaning.

From the 7th century onwards, stupas started to hold *dharani* – protective spells promising not only merit but tangible benefits such as safety, prosperity, and heavenly rebirth for the dead. Mahayana texts (Buddhist scriptures) instructed donors to write these spells on copper, stone, or clay and deposit them inside stupas. At Udayagiri and Lalitgiri in Odisha, archaeologists have found several such inscribed plaques. The stupa was no longer passive; it was now a ritual engine radiating spiritual power.

By the 8th-9th centuries AD, the stupa became a three-dimensional *mandala*, a cosmic diagram in brick and stone. The Mahastupa of Udayagiri, built on a high platform, contained four Tathagata Buddhas facing the cardinal directions, each flanked by paired Bodhisattvas – a direct reflection of the Garbhadhatu Mandala of the *Mahavairocana Sutra* (a core esoteric diagram). This was not merely a reliquary but a theatre for tantric visualisation, a space where monks and initiates could meditate on the cosmic Buddha Vairocana.

Evolution in the East

As Buddhism spread eastward from India, the stupa evolved in form and meaning. In China, it merged with native tower traditions to become the multi-storeyed pagoda, symbolising ascent towards enlightenment. In Korea and Japan, the pagoda became more slender, often built of wood or stone and serving as temple centrepieces. In Southeast Asia – Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia – the stupa grew taller and more ornate, such as Borobudur in Java, representing a cosmic mountain. While Indian stupas held relics, East and Southeast Asian versions emphasised visual symbolism, ritual circumambulation, and the merging of local architectural aesthetics.

The Piprahwa relics remind us that this is not just history. The stupa tradition is alive because the relic still matters – spiritually, culturally, even legally. India fought to stop their sale because they are not just objects, they are living heritage.

***Devdutt Pattanaik** is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.*